

Ask A Vet: Wheezing Kitty Question

Sunday, December 14, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

We had a neighbor that told us they had gone to the vet with their 6 year old cat and was told it had asthma. How in the world would a cat get asthma?

-Stunned

Dear Stunned,

As hard as it is to believe, cats can get asthma. It is sometimes called feline allergic asthma, feline allergic bronchitis or feline lower airway disease. It can affect males and females and generally young to middle-aged cats. Some breeds like the Siamese are also more prone to this. It can affect them year round if there are things in their environment that can trigger episodes for an inside cat. Outdoor allergens (pollens) cause them seasonally. By definition it is really a whole syndrome that is activated by immune cells in the body that can cause coughing, wheezing or breathing distress (dyspnea), bronchoconstriction (narrowing of bronchi), eosinophilic inflammation of airways (part of the white blood cell line), and changes in the lung lobe itself.

In the cat this can present itself as an acute attack and life-threatening especially if not able to catch its breath and present as open mouth breathing; chronic with signs that persist for long periods; or episodes that come and go. What we generally hear from clients in the history is the cat is coughing as if trying to cough up a hairball, or wheezing when they breathe. They may also notice an increase in rate of breathing or more labored breathing. Sometimes when we do the physical exam we may be able to cause coughing by just palpating the trachea. The wheezing may be heard whether you listen with a stethoscope or not. What is really happening is that there are T-helper lymphocytes in body that become really sensitized to allergens in the environment that produce cytokines that produce a complicated inflammatory response that ultimately affect bronchi and lung tissue. When the airways get reduced like a narrowed pipe, it will cause it to be harder to expire (get rid of air) than to inspire (bring air in). This is why it appears the cat is breathing harder since they have to push the air harder to get rid of the air. This turbulence in the pipe is what you hear when you hear the wheezing.

Diagnostics done to rule out other things would be chest radiographs; ruling out neoplasia (cancer), pneumonia, heart issues, parasites (lung worms), heartworm disease causing breathing problems or fluid in lungs; a complete blood count looking for eosinophils; a fecal to rule out other parasites that may also be shed in stool; and finally a possible heartworm test.

Animals presented in crisis may have to be in an oxygen cage, bronchodilators given to open up the airway either through an inhaler or nebulizer, steroids to control inflammation or immune modulating drugs. Allergy testing can be done but is expensive and requires training to give the shots by the owner. Your veterinarian is important in sorting out the clinical signs and the diagnostics to rule in or rule out asthma.

-Dr Wanda Schmeltz